

McNamara Orders SAC to Cut Back Its Airborne Alert

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Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara is drastically reducing the Strategic Air Command's air borne alert, which has kept atomic-armed B-52 bombers continuously aloft and ready to strike for the past five years.

The Pentagon chief disclosed the decision in secret testimony delivered earlier to the House Appropriations Committee and released yesterday.

The money-saving move reflects the much greater reliance placed on long-range ballistic missiles in the Nation's deterrence and defense posture, and McNamara's view that the day of manned bombers is passing.

Joint Chiefs' View

McNamara indicated that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had opposed scrapping the airborne alert entirely, and added:

"I replied that they could carry out whatever airborne alert was consistent with the regular training program and would not require additional funds. I believe the Air Force is examining what level they will wish to fly under the circumstances."

Air Force spokesmen said that the airborne alert now costs \$103.9 million a year, and this can be scaled down to \$63.6 million under the reduction contemplated.

As McNamara noted, conditions have changed considerably since the airborne alert was put in operation in January, 1961. Then the Nation had only about a half-dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles and three Polaris submarines. Today there are more than 900 ICBMs in service and 36 Polaris subs at sea, carrying

576 missiles

Radar Improved

Moreover, the radar warning net five years ago could not provide much more than 15 minutes warning of an enemy missile attack, which would not assure that SAC bombers on ground alert could get off the ground before the missiles struck. Today's radars can detect missiles as they arise, giving something approaching a 30-minute warning.

Improved communications and procedures also should enable SAC bombers to get off the ground faster in an emergency. The SAC ground alert, under which half of the Nation's 600 B-52s are kept on airstrips, with crews standing by, ready to get aloft within 15 minutes of a warning, will be continued intact.

Normally, something like a

dozen B-52s are kept on airborne alert. In an emergency considerably more — perhaps 75 — can be put up and such a force be maintained aloft for a considerable period.

Advantage Noted

This was done during the Cuban crisis of 1962, and many believe this positive demonstration of American determination and intent influenced Russia to back down. This is an advantage possessed by bombers over missiles that is often cited by bomber advocates.

At SAC Headquarters in Omaha, an Air Force spokesman said that a sufficient force of B-52s will continue to be kept on airborne alert to maintain training proficiency. Also, they said, SAC will continue to be prepared for some time to send many bombers on airborne alert quickly "to demonstrate national intent."

A large stockpile of B-52 parts has been built up to permit a sizeable airborne force to be maintained for a considerable period. McNamara said he felt the Air Force should begin to eat into those spare parts rather than continue orders of the present size in view of changed conditions.